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NEWS

ROD R. BLAGOJEVICH - GOVERNOR

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Gov. Blagojevich signs bill to further protect civil rights of Illinois citizens

New law enhances civil rights enforcement powers of Office of Attorney General

SPRINGFIELD – Governor Rod R. Blagojevich today, in his continuous effort to fight discrimination, signed Senate Bill 2878, a legislative amendment spearheaded by Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan. SB 2878 authorizes the Attorney General to file civil action suits in the name of the people of Illinois for pattern and practice violations of civil rights laws under the Illinois Human Rights Act.

Sponsored by Sen. Martin Sandoval (D-Chicago) and Rep. Arthur Turner (D-Chicago), the bill is a result of extensive discussions among Madigan's office, the Department of Human Rights and the Illinois Chamber of Commerce. The goal of the legal reform is to enhance the Attorney General office's ability to protect the civil rights of all Illinois citizens.

"We must do everything we can to ensure Illinoisans are treated equally and fairly. This change expands the reach of the Illinois Human Rights Act and provides another avenue to remedy unlawful discrimination," said Gov. Blagojevich.

Currently, although the Attorney General is authorized to enforce the civil rights of Illinois residents, the Attorney General may only file lawsuits in cases of housing discrimination. In all other cases of violations under the Human Rights Act, such as discrimination in employment, public accommodations and financial credit, the Attorney General's Office has to pursue litigation as would an individual complainant – through the Illinois Department Human Rights and the Illinois Human Rights Commission.

Now under Senate Bill 2878, the Attorney General is authorized to investigate and file suit against pattern and practice discrimination based on race, gender, national origin and disability.

The Illinois Department of Human Rights supports the new law, stating that it will broaden the reach of the Illinois Human Rights Act, allow for voluntary resolution of issues before the Attorney General commences civil action, and it is efficient in that multiple allegations of discriminatory conduct may be brought in one action as opposed to various changes.

“This law provides new tools to enable us to protect all Illinois residents by aggressively enforcing the civil rights laws,” Madigan said. “I look forward to working with Governor Blagojevich to ensure that all Illinois residents receive the equal treatment guaranteed by Illinois law. I commend Senator Sandoval and Representative Turner for their hard work on this significant legislation.”

Madigan’s office will continue to work closely with the Department of Human Rights to identify and investigate cases of pattern and practice violations. Madigan will use the full authority provided by the bill Blagojevich is signing today to enforce the Human Rights Act. For example, the new law provides that the Attorney General will be able to issue pre-lawsuit investigatory subpoenas.

Under the new law, individual plaintiffs seeking damages still must seek relief in the Department of Human Rights. However, for pattern and practice cases, the Attorney General will have the full authority to seek a court order prohibiting the discriminatory conduct and imposing penalties of up to \$50,000 for repeat offenders.